

*The Bhikkhunī-ordination controversy in Thailand*, by Martin Seeger

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# THE *BHIKKHUNĪ*-ORDINATION CONTROVERSY IN THAILAND<sup>1</sup>

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In February 2001, Chatsumarn Kabilsingh, a Thai scholar of Buddhism, was ordained a female novice (*sāmaṇerī*) in the tradition of Theravāda Buddhism. Two years later, she took Higher Ordination (*upasampadā*) and became Bhikkhunī Dhammanandā. Her ordination has sparked fervent debates in Thai society, not only about the validity of her ordination itself, but more generally about whether the vanished female ordination lineage of Theravāda Buddhism can legitimately be revived. I want to emphasize strongly that in this paper, I do not plan to examine this debate from the perspective of gender studies. My aim is rather to present and compare the differing opinions held by various influential Thai thinkers and academics, both lay persons and monks/*maechis* (*maechis* are white-clad women who have shaved their heads and eyebrows and practice the eight or ten precepts). It is, of course, impossible to take into account all of the many comments that have been made by a large number of Thai monks, Buddhologists, feminists and sociologists in connection with this debate. My purpose is to provide a sampling of representative opinions and lines of argumentation in order to explore the conflicts emerging from, on one hand, the respect paid to the authority of canonical scriptures and the desire to preserve the integrity of Theravāda Buddhism, and on the other, a growing demand for an order of nuns. Although for the most part I will discuss the Thai debate about

<sup>1</sup> Sections of this paper were, in an earlier version, first published in German in my PhD thesis (Seeger 2005). Many parts of it, however, are the outcome of more recent ideas and research. I want to thank the following persons for their valuable suggestions and critique: Ven. Jampa Tsedroen, Dr. Petra Kieffer-Pülz, Dr. Ute Hüsken, Dr. Frances Weightman, Dr. Emma Tomalin, Dr. Mike Parnwell and Prof. Mark Williams. Also, I would like to thank Bhikkhunī Dhammanandā, Mae Chee Sansanee Sthirasuta and Maechi Suphaphan na Bangchang for their valuable time and kindness in support of this research. Finally, I wish to express my thankfulness to Dr. Birgit Kellner for her many valuable comments and suggestions.

the possibility of reviving a nun's order, I will also present the stances of some influential Thai Buddhist women who do not follow the example of Bhikkhunī Dhammanandā,<sup>2</sup> but rather prefer to practice Buddhism in ways that are more commonly recognized in Thai society. One question I will not address, however, is the problem of the authenticity of canonical Theravāda scriptures. For the purpose of this article I will only investigate current inner-Theravādin conflicts that have emerged in Thailand due to the different understandings and approaches people have regarding the relevant texts from the Pāli canon.

According to Theravāda tradition, five hundred *arahants* (literally: "worthy ones," i.e. awakened ones) convened for a rehearsal (*saṅgīti*) three months after the passing away of the Buddha (*parinibbāna*) in order to compile a collection of authoritative texts of two types: the *dhamma* and the *vinaya*.<sup>3</sup> In this context, "*dhamma*" is the name for the soteriology propounded by the Buddha. "*Vinaya*," on the other hand, designates the code of discipline for his disciples that the Buddha established during his lifetime. Theravādins believe that the *dhamma* deals with eternally valid truths about life and the path to deliverance (*vimutti*). In contrast to this, the *vinaya* is not trans-historical (*akālika*), but a reaction to the social realities of northern India during the lifetime of the Buddha. According to canonical scriptures, the individual training rules (*sikkhāpada*) of the *vinaya* and the elaborations upon them developed as immediate responses to

<sup>2</sup> For the sake of simplicity, in the following I will refer to Chatsumarn Kabilsingh by her ordination name Bhikkhunī Dhammanandā, even though some of the events described in this paper took place before her higher ordination.

<sup>3</sup> Vin.II.285–289. In this article I will not address the issue of the historicity of this rehearsal or of how far the Pāli canon contains the original words of the Buddha. In many cases, the Western text-critical approach has convincingly shown that Theravāda beliefs in connection with their tradition must be questioned (for the historical problems of the First Rehearsal, see Prebish 1974, pp. 239–254; Holt 1981, pp. 43–44; Hallisey 1991, pp. 138–140). Another important point which must be mentioned is that in this article the terms "authority" and "consensus" play a vital role and will, therefore, reoccur several times. In spite of the fact that an investigation of these two terms from a sociological perspective would allow many further valuable insights, I have not engaged in such a discussion here, since this will be a topic of another article and would be beyond the objectives of this paper.

historical events in which monks or nuns behaved in ways that were not in harmony with the *dhamma* and were perceived as harmful to the newly-founded religion and the image of the Buddhist community. At the same time, however, the *vinaya* was also designed as a system for creating an optimal environment for spiritual practice, taking into account the social conditions of the time.<sup>4</sup> Fully aware of the historicity of the *vinaya*, and despite the fact that the Buddha had explicitly allowed his order to abrogate minor training rules of *vinaya* texts,<sup>5</sup> the five hundred *arahants* at the First Rehearsal decided to freeze all training rules of the *vinaya*, agreeing unanimously that these rules must not be changed.<sup>6</sup>

As a consequence of this decision, the Theravāda school developed a conservatism that has formed a central part of its identity. Texts from the Theravāda tradition<sup>7</sup> indicate that, from time to time, additional rehearsals were organized during which authoritative texts were communally recited (*saṅgāyanā*) or the monks' faithfulness to the original life-style was reviewed. The aim of these rehearsals was to "[purify] the teaching from all impurities."<sup>8</sup> This conservatism is also clear in the following quotation from the *Ñāṇodaya*:<sup>9</sup> "every single letter of the Buddha's teaching has the same value as a single Buddha image."<sup>10</sup>

<sup>4</sup> A.V.70; A.I.98, Vin.III.21.

<sup>5</sup> *Ākaṅkhamāno, ānanda, saṅgho mamaccayena khuddānukhuddakāni sikkhāpadāni samūhanatu* (D.II.154).

<sup>6</sup> *Saṅgho appaññattaṃ nappaññāpeti, paññattaṃ na samucchindati, yathāpaññattesu sikkhāpadesu samādhāya vattati* (Vin.II.288).

<sup>7</sup> Prebish 1974; Hallisey 1991.

<sup>8</sup> *Sabbaṃ sāsanaṃ sabbāni soddhāva* (Sp.I.34).

<sup>9</sup> In the 1963 Thai edition of the *Ñāṇodaya* (Buddhaghosa 2506), its authorship is attributed to the great Theravāda commentator Buddhaghosa. This is questionable, however, as v. Hinüber points out that even though in the *Mahavaṃsa* a monograph called *Ñāṇodaya* (*Ñāṇodaya nāma pakaraṇaṃ*) is ascribed to Buddhaghosa as one of his early works, "[n]othing else is known about it. (von Hinüber 2000, p. 103).

<sup>10</sup> *Ekakkharaṃ ekamekañca sathupariyattisāsanaṃ akkharaṃ buddharūpañca samam eva phalaṃ siyā* (Buddhaghosa 2506, p. 35). This conservatism is also nicely expressed in a lecture that the famous Thai Theravāda monk Buddhādāsa gave in Rangoon in 1956 during the *Chatthasaṅghāyana*, the Sixth Rehearsal according to the Burmese Theravāda tradition: "[b]eing the only teaching that succeeds in preserving the ancient pure Buddhism by

The rigidity with which the Theravāda tradition wants to preserve the *dhamma* and the original form, i.e. the monastic lifestyle and the legal acts prescribed for the monastic community (*saṅghakamma*), aims at conserving what is believed to be the most original form of Buddhism. This endeavour is motivated by the fear of losing original meaning by a process of historical erosion, i.e. oblivion or intentional manipulation. Through the course of its history, the Theravāda tradition has considered the *vinaya* as pivotal for safeguarding the continuity and longevity of Buddhism. This is nicely expressed in the commentary *Sumaṅgalavilāsīnī*: "...the *vinaya* is the duration of the Buddha's teaching. When the *vinaya* is existent, it means that the teaching is existent."<sup>11</sup>

As I will show in this paper, due to its historicity and relativity, the frozen *vinaya* is in a state of increasing tension with contemporary society and, at the same time, with the *dhamma* that Theravādins believe to be trans-historical and absolute. This tension will be investigated in the context of contemporary Thai society by studying the controversy concerning the possibility of introducing a *bhikkhunī*-order into Thai Theravāda. This controversy, which actually largely concerns the legitimacy of Higher Ordination for women, was sparked by the novice ordination (*pabbajjā*) of Chatsumarn Kabilsingh as a female novice (*sāmaṇerī*). My aim here is to examine how Theravāda's conservatism has been challenged thereby and, at the same time, what rationale has been brought forward in its defence.

adhering to the principle of admitting only the additional that would enhance the strictness of the original while being against the revoking, changing or altering of the original even in its least form... We have no warrant of addition in such a manner that would make Buddhism develop according to influence of the opportunity and locality, or to any other circumstances, to the extent that it loses its original principle; such is the addition that effects the fall of the doctrine, directly or indirectly... We are afraid of doing such a thing, We [sic] are glad to admit to the accusation that we are cowards. By means of this very cowardice, Theravada is still remaining in its pristine form of the original doctrine. May we be in cowardice in this way forever." (Buddhadāsa 2530, pp. 345–350). For conservatism in Theravāda, see also: Seeger 2005, p. 94–108, 120–134, 160–232.

<sup>11</sup> ...*vinayo nāma buddhasāsanassa āyu. Vinaye ṭhite sāsanaṃ ṭhitaṃ nāma hoti.* (Da.I.13).

## The debate about the ordination of Chatsumarn Kabilsingh

Shortly after Chatsumarn Kabilsingh's ordination as *Sāmaṇerī* Dhammanandā, the possibility of a legitimate Higher Ordination act for women began to be debated heatedly in Thai society.<sup>12</sup> The equality between men and women in terms of their spiritual potential for awakening (*bodhi*) does not seem to have been doubted by anyone involved in this debate (at least explicitly); rather, the controversy revolved around whether an ordination act (re-)initiating a female ordination lineage could be sanctioned by the *vinaya*.

For her ordination, *Bhikkhunī* Dhammanandā was "harshly attacked from senior monks who ... dismissed the possibility of female ordination within the Thai clergy."<sup>13</sup> This reaction can *inter alia* be explained by the fact that the once-existing Theravāda nun or *bhikkhunī*-order was extinguished as many as a thousand years ago. Moreover, according to the traditional reading of stipulations for the ordination procedure as outlined in the *vinaya*, a valid ordination of a *bhikkhunī* requires a double ordination: a woman seeking Higher Ordination must be ordained by both monks and nuns who have been ordained in a legitimate ordination act. But since there are no longer any legitimately ordained nuns available within the Theravāda tradition, the valid ordination of a nun is simply not possible.

There is no evidence to suggest that there have ever been Theravāda nuns in Thai history. The first attempt to establish a *bhikkhunī*-order in Thailand is thought to have been undertaken in 1927 by the former government official and engaged lay-Buddhist Narin Phasit, when he had his two daughters, Sara and Congdi, ordained as *sāmaṇerīs*. They received ordination from a monk, but no definite details became known as to precisely which monk had performed the ordination. Only two months after their ordination, the two sisters were heavily criticized from both governmental and clerical sides. A monk suspected to have ordained the two sisters was asked by his superior to leave the monkhood. After this monk left the order, how-

<sup>12</sup> Sanitsuda Ekachai 2001a.

<sup>13</sup> Sanitsuda Ekachai 2001b.

ever, he denied that he had conducted the ordination. The highest clerical administrative body in Thailand, the Mahatherasamakhom, accused Narin of wanting to destroy Buddhism. The Mahatherasamakhom further called on the two sisters to cast off their robes. Finally, this controversy resulted in a legal case. The two sisters were ordered to remove their robes, and Sara was sentenced to imprisonment and a fine of 20 Baht. When Narin asked the then-reigning King of Siam (Thailand), Rama VII, for help, his plea was refused. As a reaction to the ordination of Sara and Congdi, the Thai Saṅgharāja signed a regulation that was promulgated on 18 June 1928. This regulation forbids Thai monks to ordain women as *sāmaṇerī*, *sikkhamānā* (probationer),<sup>14</sup> or *bhikkhunī*. The regulation is still in effect today<sup>15</sup> and was reportedly also endorsed by the current Thai Saṅgharāja in a speech he gave during the annual graduation ceremony of the Mahamakut University for monks only three months after Bhikkhunī Dhammanandā's novice ordination.<sup>16</sup>

According to Bhikkhunī Dhammanandā, this *saṅgha* regulation contradicts the Thai constitution,<sup>17</sup> which guarantees equality between men and women in Paragraph 5, and in Paragraph 38, freedom in Thailand to adhere to and practice any religion. Since, as Bhikkhunī Dhammanandā maintains, the constitution is the highest authoritative body of laws in Thailand, the aforementioned *saṅgha* regulation that contradicts it is, as a matter of course, invalid.<sup>18</sup> In connection with this point, the academic Kulavir Prapapornpipat, who is affiliated to the Women's Studies Center at Chiang Mai University and describes herself as a "Buddhist feminist," perceives an inconsistency between the Thai *saṅgha*'s attitude to the "law of the country" and the approach of the Buddha. She explains:

<sup>14</sup> See: Juo-Hstieh Shih 2000, pp. 406–453.

<sup>15</sup> Wirat Thiraphanmethi/Thongbai Thirananthangkun 2546, p. 61; Duean Khamdi 2544, pp. 228–230.

<sup>16</sup> 'Daily News' of Monday, 4 June 2544, p. 19 (quoted in: Duean Khamdi 2554, appendix p. 48).

<sup>17</sup> Bhikkhunī Dhammanandā here refers to the constitution of 1997, which was current at the time of her writing, but has in the meantime become abolished in the coup of 2006.

<sup>18</sup> Nasak Atcimathon 2544, pp. 74–75; Atiya Achakulwisut 2001a.

... the [Thai] *saṅgha* gives the justification that the state or *anacakka* [wheel of power] should not get involved in the affairs of the *saṅgha* institution or *sāsanacakka* [the wheel of the religion]. Regarding this point, if we look back to the stance of the Buddha ..., when the practical regulations of the *saṅgha* were at odds with the principles of the country's law, the Buddha had the *saṅgha* conform to the law of the state in order to avoid conflict...<sup>19</sup>

Kulavir suggests that "... those parts of the *saṅgha* regulations and laws that are at variance with the principles of constitutional law [should be reconsidered]."<sup>20</sup>

At the same time, however, a *bhikkhunī* ordination in Thailand might be rendered judicially precarious by a paragraph in the Thai penal law, according to which a person who is not properly ordained, but wears the robes of clerics, can be sentenced to imprisonment of no longer than one year or to a fine of not more than 20,000 Baht, or both.<sup>21</sup>

Against the opinion that seems to prevail among the Thai *saṅgha*, Bhikkhunī Dhammanandā maintains that a revival of the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha* is still possible. Prior to her ordination, she delved into a comparative study of transmitted versions of the *bhikkhunī-pātimokkha*.<sup>22</sup> Based on her investigations, as well as on further historical research, she has concluded that the ordination lineage of nuns to which she belongs descends from the original Theravāda tradition. She is reported to have said that:

... I assure you that the ordination of Chinese nuns has its origin in a Theravāda Buddhist lineage. But despite this, our [contemporary] Theravāda tries to reject its own descendants, instead of accepting them in admiration that they have been able to remain firm and to transmit [their tradition].<sup>23</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Kulavir Prapornpipat 2548, p. 37; note that all translations from the Thai quoted in this paper are my own. Kulavir Prapornpipat is probably referring here to Vin.I.138, where the Buddha says: "Bhikkhus, I ask you to act according to [the laws] of kings" (*anujānāmi bhikkhave rājūnarāṇāṃ anuvattituntī*).

<sup>20</sup> Kulavir Prapornpipat 2548, p. 40.

<sup>21</sup> Duean Khamdi 2544, p. 239.

<sup>22</sup> See: Chatsumarn Kabilsingh 1991. "Pātimokkha" is the name of the texts that contain the 227 or 311 training rules (*sikkhāpada*) for monks and nuns respectively.

<sup>23</sup> Quoted in: Phimphan Hansakun/Bunkhanit Worawithayanon/Chaiwat Premcan 2544, p. 142.



The Chinese nun tradition that Bhikkhunī Dhammanandā has in mind follows the *vinaya* texts of the Dharmaguptaka, which, according to Bhikkhunī Dhammanandā, is a subgroup of Theravāda.

Thai monks and scholars of Buddhism, however, counter this argument by saying that the lineage she is referring to was transmitted with the help of “Mahāyāna monks”: they argue that two different *saṅghas* performed the ordination act. For them, this makes the ordination problematic if not invalid. At this point, however, it must be noted that Mahāyāna did not develop its own *vinaya* texts but used *vinaya* texts of pre-Mahāyāna Buddhist schools, of which Theravāda and Dharmaguptaka are only two. The designation “Mahāyāna monks,” which is widely used in the Thai nun ordination controversy, therefore disguises the problem at the core of the disagreement about nun ordination, namely the interpretation of the *vinaya*. Historically, the differentiation between Mahāyāna and other Buddhist schools (*nikāya*) did not emerge from disagreements about the *vinaya*, but rather arose from different understandings of Buddhist soteriology (*dhmma*). In this regard, Bechert writes that: “Whereas the *nikāyas* were defined as groups of monks that mutually acknowledged the validity of their *upasampadā* or Higher Ordination and made use of particular recensions of the sacred texts, the rise of Mahāyāna Buddhism was a development which pervaded the whole sphere of Buddhism and all *nikāyas*.”<sup>24</sup> While Bhikkhunī Dhammanandā is right when she says that the Chinese nun’s lineage relies on Dharmaguptaka *vinaya* texts, the above-mentioned argument that the Dharmaguptaka school is a descendant of Theravāda might be seen as problematic, since both Dharmaguptaka and Theravāda are subgroups of the Sthavira school.<sup>25</sup>

Be that as it may, traditionalists consider an ordination that relies on the lineage of Chinese nuns to be a cross-*saṅgha* ordination, a

<sup>24</sup> Bechert 1973, p. 11; see also: Williams 2000, pp. 99–100.

<sup>25</sup> Choong 2000, pp. 2–5; Kieffer-Pülz 2005, p. 2, 5. In an interview I held with Bhikkhunī Dhammanandā (30/03/2007), she said that she is aware of this: “All the *vinaya* lineages, now, are all Theravāda... I refer to Theravāda, now, with the understanding that it keeps the continuation from the old [Theravāda, i.e. Sthavira school].”

case of so-called *nānāsaṃvāsa* (“a different community”).<sup>26</sup> When a monk is temporarily “excluded” (*ukkhita*) from the order, or – and this is relevant here – when a monk or several monks develop/profound a different interpretation of the *vinaya*, these monks are then called *nānāsaṃvāsaka*, “belonging to a different community,” by the *saṅgha* from which they have been excluded or whose *vinaya* interpretation they no longer share. And, according to traditional understanding, a valid ordination act cannot be performed by “members of a different community” (*nānāsaṃvāsaka*).<sup>27</sup> For proponents of the *bhikkhunī*-ordination, however, this argument is not valid. They argue that since at the time the Buddha laid down the rules for the ordination procedure there was no division into different schools, to require that the nuns who perform their part of the ordination must be Theravāda is “beyond the domain of the Buddha’s teaching [*dharmavinaya*].” In her book “The Transmission of the *bhikkhunī*-*saṅgha* in Sri Lanka,” Bhikkhunī Dhammanandā writes that the insistence on such a requirement shows “to what degree those who so strongly keep up the congregations [*nikāya*] ... are attached to trifling matters [เรื่องเหตุหมิ่น].”<sup>28</sup>

Two further concerns have been raised in connection with cross-*saṅgha* ordination and the intactness of the ordination lineage. The first relates to the requirement that the texts used during the ordination procedure, these being certain of the set phrases that accompany the various *saṅgha* acts (*kammavācā*), have to be recited in keeping with the Pāli canon’s wording and language. This is because, according to traditional Theravāda understanding, flaws in the ordination formulae lead to the “failure” (*vipatti*) of the ordination act and, consequently, the ordination is invalid. Since the Dharmaguptaka school uses a language other than Pāli – the language of the Theravādins – during the ordination act, Theravādins might perceive this as *kammavācāvipatti*, that is, as invalid ordinations due to incorrect wording. A further problem arises from the

<sup>26</sup> Phra Sipariyattimoli 2544, pp. 110–111; Chamnan Nisarāt 2544, p. 73.

<sup>27</sup> Kieffer-Pülz 1992, pp. 53–54, 64; Chamnan Nisarāt 2544, p. 73.

<sup>28</sup> Dhammanandā Sāmaṇerī 2544, p. 21. See also: Phra Phaisan Wisalo 2546, pp. 360–361.

significant differences between the Theravāda and Dharmaguptaka schools in designating the so-called *sīmā*. *Sīmā* is the boundary that clearly defines the area in which legal acts (*saṅghakamma*) can be carried out. The Dharmaguptaka school, for example, uses more markers for defining the *sīmā* than Theravāda does and also makes use of certain markers that are not permissible in the Theravāda school. As the rules for authorizing *sīmā* form another legal requirement for a valid ordination procedure, Theravādins might consequently perceive an ordination that is perfectly valid according to Dharmaguptaka standards as invalid according to their own requirements.<sup>29</sup> Before traditional Theravādins can move towards agreement concerning a revival of the *bhikkhunī*-order, these legal discrepancies must be resolved.

However, the concerns that have been raised with regard to the legitimacy of a cross-*saṅgha* ordination do not pertain exclusively to differences in the *vinaya*. Chamnan Nisarath, a Thai scholar of Buddhism, voices another objection to the validity of the ordination act when he explains that the term *nānāsaṃvāsa* indicates differences between *saṅghas* due to the absence of both *sīlasāmaññatā* ("congruity of moral rules") and *diṭṭhisāmaññatā* ("congruity of right views"). From this explanation follows that, since the order from which Bhikkhunī Dhammanandā derives her ordination lineage not only has a different *vinaya* but also an understanding of the *dhamma* that is different from the Theravāda's, the two communities are *nānāsaṃvāsa* to each other. And it is for this reason that, according to Chamnan, a cross-*saṅgha* ordination act between these two schools is not possible.<sup>30</sup>

*Sīlasāmaññatā* and *diṭṭhisāmaññatā* constitute the fifth and sixth points respectively of the six *sāraṇīyadhammas* ("states of conciliation"), which are found twice in canonical scriptures. The Buddha explains that the practice of these six *sāraṇīyadhammas* "leads to" (*saṃvattanti*) a number of beneficial things, namely to "solidarity" (*saṅgahāya*), "absence of dispute" (*avivādāya*), "harmony" (*sāmag-*

<sup>29</sup> Phra Sipariyattimoli 2544, pp. 98–117; interview with Phra Payutto (04/01/2004); Kieffer-Pülz 1992; Kieffer-Pülz 2005, pp. 4–6.

<sup>30</sup> Chamnan Nisarath 2544, pp. 72–73.

*giyā*) and “unity” (*ekībhāvāya*).<sup>31</sup> And it is unity, harmony, coherence and consensus that the foremost authority on canonical questions in Thailand, the monk scholar Phra Payutto, perceives as major factors for the successful continuation of the Theravāda tradition. Diversification and fragmentation into different schools might lead to the loss or distortion of the original meaning of the Buddha’s teaching and, thereby, to the disappearance of authentic Buddhism.<sup>32</sup> This concern is exemplified in the way he counters Suwanna Satha-Anand’s understanding of the pertinent canonical passages and her argumentation in favour of the establishment of a *bhikkhunī*-order.

In the Buddha’s decision to allow the ordination of *bhikkhunīs* in a socio-cultural environment that was influenced by patriarchal attitudes, Suwanna Satha-Anand, a scholar of religious studies at the Philosophy Department of Chulalongkorn University, perceives a principle that prefers “ultimate truth” (*paramatthasacca*) to “conventional truth” (*sammutisacca*). While *paramatthasacca*, in this context, appeals to the equipotentiality of awakening for men and women, *sammutisacca* reflects “the cultural constraints of that time” which “would have disallowed the nuns’ order.” Suwanna, therefore, requests that the contemporary Thai *saṅgha* not accept that “one accident in history [i.e. the interruption of the female ordination lineage]... triumph[s] over the Buddha’s decision.”<sup>33</sup> As the Buddha adjusted the *vinaya* according to the social conditions of his time, “when conditions of lay society change, the Buddha would desire the *saṅgha* to change as necessary.”<sup>34</sup> Since contemporary society has become more open-minded on women’s issues, Suwanna demands that the *vinaya* be changed accordingly:

... [t]he principle of [ultimate] truth over convention[al truth] should serve as a basis for future feminist interpretations and negotiations of the Buddhist scriptures. It should also serve as a basis for institutional decisions of the Sangha in relation to women’s issues. What is at stake is not only the human

<sup>31</sup> D.III.245; A.III.288–9.

<sup>32</sup> Interview with Phra Payutto (04/01/2004).

<sup>33</sup> Atiya Achakulwisut 2001b; Suwanna Satha-Anand 2001, pp. 281–291; see also: Dhammanandā 2546, pp. 69–71.

<sup>34</sup> Suwanna Satha-Anand 2001, p. 288.

rights of women, but also the philosophical universality and institutional integrity of Buddhism itself.<sup>35</sup>

However, according to Phra Payutto, such a deliberate change of *vinaya* texts could lead to the emergence of different interpretations and, therefore, to diversification and fragmentation into different schools, since even a superficial change of these authoritative texts risks bringing about the loss of consensus. For who has the authority to change these texts after the death of the Buddha? The only answer can be: the *saṅgha*. But it seems rather unlikely that the whole *saṅgha* – either historically or geographically – could come to a unanimous decision on this point. Phra Payutto maintains that as long as the original texts are preserved and the practices being conducted aim at being in accordance with them, the Buddha remains the highest and only authority, which means that “there is *one* centre and therefore *one* view [*mati*].”<sup>36</sup> To Phra Payutto, this is the only realistic means to achieve and maintain consensus.

Therefore, in his view, an adaptation of the *vinaya* to the contemporary situation risks a fragmentation into different schools. But the unity (*sāmaggi*) of the *saṅgha* is – as mentioned above – a necessary factor for the preservation and successful continuation of the Theravāda tradition. Phra Payutto expresses this idea as follows: “if a [Theravāda] group in any country develops a new view [*mati*], this means that Theravāda commences to break up.”<sup>37</sup> At the same time, however, Phra Payutto is aware that Theravāda’s adherence to the agreement of the five hundred *arahants* at the First Rehearsal can cause “difficulties” (ความยากลำบาก) for the tradition and “certainly involves negative points” (แน่นอนมีข้อเสีย).<sup>38</sup> In this regard, he says that the Theravāda tradition has to “sacrifice itself” (เสียสละตัวเอง) for the purpose of preserving the original Buddhist teaching. This means that flexibility is set aside for the sake of consensus. As a conse-

<sup>35</sup> Suwanna Satha-Anand 2001, p. 290.

<sup>36</sup> Interview with Phra Payutto on 04/01/2004.

<sup>37</sup> Interview with Phra Payutto held on 04/01/2004.

<sup>38</sup> Interview with Phra Payutto held on 04/01/2004; Dhamma-talk of P.A. Payutto on 1/08/2006 (available as MP3 at: <http://www.watnyanaves.net/sounds/2549.php>, accessed on 15/08/2007).

quence, the tradition's longevity is believed ensured and original forms are assumed preserved. For him, the First Rehearsal has already shown that an agreement as to which rules might be considered for change is very difficult to achieve: the five hundred *arahants* were not able to agree on what the Buddha meant by the "minor rules" (*khuddānukhuddakāni sikkhāpadāni*) that he allowed to be abrogated if required by the *saṅgha* (*ākaṅkhamāno... saṅgho*).<sup>39</sup>

In connection with the *bhikkhunī*-ordination controversy, the Thai Buddhologist Somphan Phromtha notes that Theravāda Buddhism "acts as if the Buddha were a god whose regulations are things that cannot be touched and adjusted." He perceives this attitude to contradict the character of original Buddhism. He contends that "whereas original Buddhism seems to have had no owner, it became clear that it developed into something which has an owner."<sup>40</sup> Somphan states that "without questioning we seem to have accepted that the five hundred *arahants* own [Buddhism]."<sup>41</sup> For him and Channarong Bunnun, another Thai scholar of Buddhism who has actively taken part in the debate about the ordination of nuns, the decision of the five hundred *arahants* at the First Rehearsal can be interpreted as not being in conformity with the intention of the Buddha, who gave his community explicit permission to abrogate "minor" rules. For Channarong Bunnun, the rigidity with which the Theravāda tradition abides by the agreement of the five hundred *arahants* at the First Rehearsal to forbid any change to the *vinaya* rules is not in line with the flexibility with which the Buddha reacted to his own social environment. By allowing for such changes, Channarong Bunnun claims, the Buddha wanted the *saṅgha* not only to have the authority but also the duty to decide what the minor rules are.<sup>42</sup>

Recently, primarily in connection with the *bhikkhunī* controversy, some Thai thinkers have uttered doubts about the proceedings and motivations of the participants of the First Rehearsal. For the

<sup>39</sup> D.II.154.

<sup>40</sup> Somphan Phromtha 2547, p. 2.

<sup>41</sup> Somphan Phromtha 2547, p. 3.

<sup>42</sup> Channarong Bunnun 2543, 7; Channarong Bunnun 2545, p. 8; Channarong Bunnun 2547b, pp. 8–9. See also Channarong Bunnun 2547a.

sociologist Aphinya Fuengfusakun, for example, the events during the First Rehearsal show that there was “dissatisfaction with women” (การไม่พอใจผู้หญิง) which “exploded” during the First Rehearsal.<sup>43</sup>

However, some hold that this interpretation could have grave consequences for the identity of the Theravāda tradition. As the young scholar monk W. Wachiramethi suggests:

if someone carelessly accuses the senior monks who took part in the First Rehearsal of having had prejudices [*agati*] towards women, he/she might just as well say that these senior monks were not real *arahants*.<sup>44</sup>

Indeed, this contention is explicitly made by Mettānando Bhikkhu, who concludes from his text-critical examination of various canonical scriptures the following:

... the actual intention of the First Rehearsal was not the compilation of the *dhammavinaya*<sup>45</sup> ... in order to – according to the words of Mahākassapa – protect the [Buddhist] religion from decline, but [the intention was] the entire and rapid elimination of the *bhikkhunī-saṅgha*. For this reason, the essence of the Rehearsal was to reform the *vinaya*, particularly all those parts that deal with the *bhikkhunīs*...<sup>46</sup>

Apart from Ānanda, Mettānando Bhikkhu claims, all other 499 participants of the First Rehearsal “had deeply entrenched brahmanical values... Probably, they were not real *arahants* [...], [despite the fact that in the canonical texts it is stated that they actually were *arahants* (V.II.285)]. These are only pretensions.”<sup>47</sup>

Another argument that has been brought forward for the introduction of a *bhikkhunī*-order is based on an untraditional reading of the

<sup>43</sup> <http://www.geocities.com/finearts2544/newpage1.html> (accessed on 10/10/2005)

<sup>44</sup> W. Wachiramethi Phikkhu 2545, p. 78. According to Theravāda understanding, an *arahant* is free of any prejudices (*agati*).

<sup>45</sup> *Dhammavinaya* in this context refers to the teachings and monastic regulations of the Buddha.

<sup>46</sup> Mettānando Bhikkhu 2545, p. 226.

<sup>47</sup> Mettānando Bhikkhu 2545, p. 215. This hypothesis, together with its many implications, is, of course, hugely challenging for the identity of Theravāda Buddhism. Understandably, Mettānando Bhikkhu's publication and his talks that express this and a number of other challenging hypotheses have caused turmoil in Thai society, for an analysis of which see Seeger 2005, pp. 160–213.

pertinent *vinaya* texts. Rabiaprat Phongphanit, a senator from Khon Kaen province and an avowed feminist,<sup>48</sup> argues that the Buddha never cancelled his permission for monks to perform the full ordination procedure for women. As a result, any Thai monk in Thailand is allowed to conduct such an ordination act.<sup>49</sup> She refers to a passage in the *vinaya* texts where the Buddha explicitly permitted monks to ordain the five hundred women companions of his stepmother Mahāpajāpatī: after her ordination, she had asked what she should do with her companions, who also wished to be ordained.<sup>50</sup> According to traditional understanding, however, this permission was replaced by a more elaborate ordination procedure which requires that both *saṅghas* (*ubhatoṣaṅghe*) conduct the ordination act. In the *vinaya*, the following reasons are given for this development: before a candidate can be admitted to the order, she has to be interviewed as to whether she fulfils the admission criteria, i.e. has no “obstacles for ordination” (*antarāyikā dhammā*). Originally, these interviews were conducted by monks. But since some of the questions relate to delicate issues such as menstruation, sexual orientation and private parts,<sup>51</sup> the women were so embarrassed that “they were not able to answer.”<sup>52</sup> For this reason, the Buddha proclaimed the double-ordination process: the aspirants were first interviewed by nuns. Provided they passed the interview (*visuddhāya*), they were then fully admitted by the male *saṅgha*. Double-ordination is also prescribed in the eight “heavy *dhammas*” (*garudhammā*)<sup>53</sup> that the Buddha wanted Mahāpajāpatī to accept for herself and all other female

<sup>48</sup> In addition to relying on this argument, Rabiaprat, as did Bhikkhunī Dhammanandā, also appeals to the Thai constitution. Conversely, Bhikkhunī Dhammanandā, like Rabiaprat, also refers to the Buddha’s permission for monks to ordain women (see: Dhammanandā 2546, p. 85; interview with Bhikkhunī Dhammanandā on 30/03/2007).

<sup>49</sup> Phucatkansapda 2546.

<sup>50</sup> *kathaṃ bhante imāsu sākiyānīsu paṭipajjāmīti* (Vin.II.256).

<sup>51</sup> Vin.II.271.

<sup>52</sup> *Tena kho pana samayena bhikkhū bhikkhunīnaṃ antarāyike dhamme pucchanti. Upasampadā pekkhāyo vitthāyanti maṅkū honti na sakkonti vissajjetuṃ* (Vin.II.271).

<sup>53</sup> While Gombrich and Joo-Hsüeh Shih translate “*garudhamma*” with “rules of hierarchy” (Joo-Hsüeh Shih 2000, pp. 463–464), Hüsken gives the translation “wichtige Regeln” (Hüsken 1993, p. 154).



aspirants when she requested her ordination as the first woman in the history of Buddhism.<sup>54</sup>

The arguments for an (re-)initiation of a *bhikkhunī*-order that have been presented so far are largely based on canonical scriptures. The proponents of a *bhikkhunī*-order refer to these scriptures in various ways: they try to comply with their literal meaning, as in the case of Bhikkhunī Dhammanandā<sup>55</sup> or Rabiaprat, they try to identify their “original spirit,” as in the case of Suwanna Satha-Anand, or they discover discrepancies within the texts and thus try to isolate the earliest text layers, as in the case of Mettānando Bhikkhu. At the same time, there are other voices that mainly raise social arguments.<sup>56</sup> A number of renowned scholars demand the right for women to receive the *upasampadā* because they believe that the opportunity to become ordained would help offset the socio-structural inequality between Thai men and women. As one Thai academic puts it, “[t]he existence of a *bhikkhuni* order could provide a new opportunity for poor rural girls who otherwise would end up in sweat shops or brothels.”<sup>57</sup> In contrast to Thai women, Thai men have the opportunity to enter the *saṅgha* and thereby gain an education if their parents cannot afford to send them to school. Furthermore, solely by virtue of his ordination, a Thai monk is elevated to the peak of social esteem and enjoys a

<sup>54</sup> *dve vassāni chasu dhammesu sikkhitasikkhāya sikkhamānāya ubhatosanghe upasampadā pariyesitabbā* (Vin.II.255). Many Western Buddhologists have expressed their doubts with regard to the historicity of the account of Mahāpajāpati’s ordination and the authenticity of the eight *garudhammas* (Hüsken 1993, pp. 169–170; Joo-Hsüeh Shih 2000, p. 13, 417–453; Kieffer-Pülz 2005, p. 1). Thai scholars likewise doubt the authenticity of the eight *garudhammas* (see e.g.: Tavivat Puntarigivat 2002, p. 111). For Mettānando Bhikkhu these eight rules are interpolations that were put in the mouth of the Buddha after his death. The actual intention of the eight *garudhammas* was “to eliminate the order of nuns completely and rapidly” (Mettānando Bhikkhu 2545, p. 125).

<sup>55</sup> Although Bhikkhunī Dhammanandā, like other Thai scholars, seems to have doubts about the authenticity of certain passages, she still basically tries to comply with the regulations as they are prescribed in canonical texts (see, e.g.: Dhammanandā 2546, p. 61; interview with Bhikkhunī Dhammanandā on 30/03/2007).

<sup>56</sup> This does not mean that the aforementioned proponents of a *bhikkhunī*-order do not also use these social arguments.

<sup>57</sup> Tavivat Puntarigivat cited in: Atiya Achakulwisut 2001b; see also Chatsumarn Kabilsingh 2002, pp. 97–98, Ouyporn Khuankaew 2002, pp. 16–17, Channarong Bunnun 2545, p. 28, Suwanna Satha-Anand 2001, p. 289.

range of privileges regardless of his individual social background: he receives free shelter and clothing, pays reduced travel fares, and receives the highest respect from all strata of Thai society, including royalty.<sup>58</sup> Under the current conditions, this is a position that Thai women can never reach, since they are barred from access to this institutional avenue of social mobility. In connection with social discrimination, proponents of the introduction of *bhikkhunīs* also refer to the Thai constitution<sup>59</sup> which – as already mentioned – guarantees freedom of adherence to and practice of religion.

Still, for Phra Payutto the initiation of a *bhikkhunī*-order remains impossible, for while women continue to have the basic right to become ordained, there are no Theravāda nuns who could perform their part of the ordination procedure – thus, the necessary factors for the ordination of women are no longer available. For him, the basic objective in resolving the current difficulties is therefore “to support the women, but not to damage the *dhammavinaya* [i.e. the original teaching and monastic regulations of the Buddha].”<sup>60</sup> Thai society as a whole, including the *saṅgha*, should attempt to find other (realizable) solutions to help disadvantaged women out of their social misery and level out social inequality.<sup>61</sup>

Despite his firm stance against the initiation of a *bhikkhunī*-order, Phra Payutto is in favour of the introduction of a para-monastic institution. He sees possible advantages if the tradition is augmented with new elements. Based on men and women’s equal potential to attain awakening and the still existent basic right for women to become ordained, Phra Payutto points out that it might be possible to introduce an alternative institution: the establishment of a “*bhikkhunī* [order] in a new form” (ภิกขุณีในรูปแบบใหม่).<sup>62</sup> However, by doing this, “we

<sup>58</sup> This can be understood as a kind of “charisma of office.” Individual monks may of course, additionally enhance their charisma through special skills or knowledge, like knowledge of the scriptures, mind-reading powers, the power of prediction, and so forth, or through a high position in the hierarchy within the Thai *saṅgha*.

<sup>59</sup> That is, the Thai constitution of 1997, which was abolished in the coup of 2006.

<sup>60</sup> Phra Thammapidok 2544, p. 10.

<sup>61</sup> Phra Thammapidok 2547, pp. 72–73.

<sup>62</sup> Interview with Phra Payutto on 15/07/2002. See also Phra Phaisan Wisalo 2546, pp.

[would have to] accept the fact that [these nuns] are not *bhikkhunīs* according to the regulations of the Buddha [*buddhapaññatti*].”<sup>63</sup> I have shown how this stance represents Theravāda’s perception of itself as a historically grown entity that endeavours to work against natural or deliberately created erosion. This entity was shaped especially by the events at the First Rehearsal, three months after Buddha’s death, and by the subsequent growth and closure of the Pāli canon together with the composition of the various layers of the Theravāda commentaries (Aṭṭhakathā, Tīkā and Anuṭīkā).<sup>64</sup> In this endeavour, maintaining form (*vinaya*) is regarded as essential for preserving content (*dhamma*). Or in the words of Phra Payutto: “as long as the form [รูป] is existent, it is easier to invigorate the content [เนื้อหา].”<sup>65</sup>

In addition to his positive stance regarding the introduction of a new sort of order of nuns, Phra Payutto also emphatically argued, already well before the *bhikkhunī* ordination controversy, that the social status of Thai *maechis* needs to be raised in order to provide Thai women with more opportunities to gain access to education.<sup>66</sup> For Phra Payutto, *maechis*, through their acts of social services, would be more enriching for society than *bhikkhunīs*. The *bhikkhunīs* would necessarily be constrained by their 311 training rules (*sikkhāpada*), making their contact with society rather difficult. Phra Payutto further opines that an improvement of the status of *maechis*, which has been an institution in Thailand for centuries, might be more likely to be socially accepted within conservative Thai circles. The introduction of *bhikkhunīs* might lead to “factionalism and disharmony.”<sup>67</sup> But in order to improve the status of *maechis*, better education facili-

360–362.

<sup>63</sup> “ยอมรับความจริงว่า ไม่ใช่ภิกษุณีตามพุทธบัญญัติ” (interview with Phra Payutto on 15/07/2002).

<sup>64</sup> See Seeger 2005, p. 124–127; Seeger 2007a, p. 7.

<sup>65</sup> Interview with Phra Payutto on 04/01/2004.

<sup>66</sup> Phra Payutto gives a much wider meaning to “education” than is normally understood. For him, “real” education comprises the threefold training (*sikkhāttaya*), which consists of morality (*sīla*), mental training (*samādhi*) and the creation of wisdom (*paññā*). These things, however, are nothing less than the three aspects of the Path to Awakening (*majjhimā paṭipadā*), cf. further Seeger 2005, pp. 273–274.

<sup>67</sup> Sanitsuda Ekachai 1999, pp. 227–234; Sanitsuda Ekachai 2001c, pp. 218–227.

ties are crucial, legal amendments are necessary, and the active engagement of the *maechis* themselves is needed.<sup>68</sup>

The problem with the current situation of *maechis* is that they are not really regarded as clerics and have, to some extent, low prestige in Thai society. Although it seems that there is a growing number of educated middle-class women who have been “ordained” as *maechis*, thus giving the institution wider respect in Thai society (see below), and although there are *maechis* who are highly respected for their social engagement or knowledge, *maechis* on the whole still have a rather negative reputation in large parts of Thai society: they are, for instance, said to have chosen spiritual life because of a broken heart or because they are homeless and deprived of other opportunities. In addition, begging *maechis* can often be seen in the streets of Bangkok, which further damages their general reputation. With respect to the clerical status of *maechis*, in fact, the Thai state has an ambivalent stance: whereas the Ministry of Transport and Communications regards them as not ordained, the Ministry of Interior treats them as ordained – unlike monks, *maechis* must pay full travel fares for public transport, but, like monks, they are not allowed to vote.

In the following section, I would like to present the stances of three influential Thai Buddhist women who do not follow the example of Bhikkhunī Dhammanandā, but rather prefer to continue to practice Buddhism in ways that are more commonly recognized in Thai society. As a sample of the voices of such women, who explicitly say that they do not want to be ordained, I shall present the viewpoints of Mae Chee [*maechi*] Sansanee Sthirasuta,<sup>69</sup> very famous in Thai society, of the acknowledged *tipiṭaka*-expert Suphaphan na Bangchang, who also is a *maechi*, and of the well-known disciple of Buddhādāsa, Prof. Rancuan Intharakamhaeng, a Buddhist *upāsikā*,

<sup>68</sup> In this connection, Phra Payutto has suggested alternative appellations for *maechis*, like *nekkhammikā* (“woman who gives up the world”) or *bhāvikā* (“women who trains herself”). (Interview with Phra Payutto on 04/01/2004). See also Parichart Suwanbubha 2003, pp. 68–73; Seeger 2007b.

<sup>69</sup> Here, “Mae Chee” is the equivalent of “Maechi,” but since it is used in connection with a proper name, I respect the preferred way of transliteration that is used by Mae Chee Sansanee Sthirasuta herself.

i.e. a female lay follower. For Maechi Suphaphan na Bangchang, the Pāli canon clearly renders female ordination impossible due to the requirement of the double-ordination. Furthermore, in her view, “changing the *tipiṭaka* [Pāli canon] would be *pāpa* [demeritorious] and *akusala* [unwholesome].” She also perceives being a *bhikkhunī* as “risky” (เสี่ยง) due to the 311 training rules of the *pātimokkha*, especially the eight *pārājika* rules that a *bhikkhunī* would have to follow. In contrast, as a *maechi* she does not feel constrained in her spiritual practice at all, but perfectly able to practice and disseminate the Buddhist teaching. Maechi Suphaphan na Bangchang reports that, like Thai monks, she goes for alms every morning and is treated with great respect, be it on the bus or at the university. According to her, this shows that the once rather “negative” image of *maechis* in Thai society is changing. She states that there are a large number of highly respected *maechis* who teach monks in Abhidhamma studies, a subject that is currently flourishing in Thailand.<sup>70</sup>

Mae Chee Sansanee likewise claims that being a *maechi* does not negatively influence her spiritual practice. For both Mae Chee Sansanee and Maechi Suphaphan na Bangchang, practicing Buddhism means transcending gender identity as male or female. For them, the absence of the *bhikkhunī* institution in Theravāda Buddhism does not necessarily raise the question of gender inequality. Mae Chee Sansanee also doubts that the introduction of a *bhikkhunī* or *sāmaṇerī* institution could provide a viable alternative education model for Thai women or girls, similar to the male *saṅgha* institution. For even though Mae Chee Sansanee is very popular in Thai society, and even though women can be ordained as *maechis* at her institution Sathira-Dhammasathan, thereby gaining an education,<sup>71</sup> only a small number decide to do so.<sup>72</sup> According to her, more and more Thais are interested in studying Buddhism, but the number of people who are

<sup>70</sup> Interview with Maechi Suphaphan na Bangchang on 12/04/2006.

<sup>71</sup> Thai girls and women also have the possibility to enrol in the Thammacariniwitthaya School located in Ratburi, which is run by *maechis*, or to become member of the Dhammā-māta Hermitage (Thammasom Thamamata) in South Thailand (see footnote 76).

<sup>72</sup> Interview with Mae Chee Sansanee Sthirasuta on 19/04/2006.

seriously committed to becoming ordained is quite limited or, in the case of male novices (*sāmaṇera*), even dropping.

Prof. Rancuan Intharakamhaeng also regards the re-initiation of the Theravāda Buddhist *bhikkhunī*-order as impossible and, at the same time, as unnecessary: "If you ask me if I myself want to be a *bhikkhunī*, I answer that I do not need this. The only thing I need is to be a practitioner of the *dhamma*." Demanding a *bhikkhunī*-order would add more "conflict" to Thai society. The "duty" of practicing Thai Buddhist women is not to demand a *bhikkhunī* institution but "to improve and develop themselves in order to become valuable persons." In this way women are able to increase their self-respect and, by doing this, to also earn greater respect, instantly and by themselves, from Thai society.<sup>73</sup>

Here, it must be noted that these three women represent an educated elite, and thus their views cannot stand for all Thai *maechis*. In addition, it is still unclear to what extent their way of practice is a real alternative to *bhikkhunī* ordination. This sample of three views of female practitioners has nonetheless shown that Thai Buddhist women are by no means unanimous or united concerning the questions that have been fervently discussed since Bhikkhunī Dhammanandā's ordination. In fact, it must be understood that only a minority of Thai Buddhist women are proponents for introducing a *bhikkhunī*-order (albeit their numbers seem to be growing).

It seems that in Thai society there exist an increasing number of opportunities for women to study and practice Buddhism intensively in monasteries or monastery-like environments, for instance, in the *dhammamātā* programme initiated by Buddhadāsa,<sup>74</sup> the ten precepts-keeping *sikkhamātu* of Santi Asok, or in Mae Chee Sansanee Sthirasuta's Sathira-Dhammasathan.<sup>75</sup> Moreover, the prestige of

<sup>73</sup> Phikun Wiphatprathip (ed.) 2547, pp. 37–39.

<sup>74</sup> Buddhadāsa initiated this programme to make up for the lack of a *bhikkhunī* order. In order to become a Dhamma-Mother (Dhammamātā) one has to be between 25 and 65 years old and free of chronic illness (see: <http://www.buddhadasa.org/html/life-work/dhammadana/dhammamata.html>; accessed on 26/05/2006; Phikun Wiphatprathip (ed.) 2547).

<sup>75</sup> Phikun Wiphatprathip (ed.) 2547, p. 32.

women who practice *dhamma* seems to be growing, as can be seen by the strong and wide reverence for female *dhamma* teachers like Mae Chee Sansanee, Upāsikā Rancuan Intharakamhæng, Maechi Khonnokying and Khun Mae Siri Krinchai.<sup>76</sup>

### Summary of the debate and future prospects

As I have shown, opinions regarding the establishment of a Theravāda Buddhist *bhikkhunī*-order in Thailand are quite diverse and often contrary to one another. Although the Buddha said that one of the parts (*aṅga*) that makes his religion “complete” (*paripūra*) is the existence of a *bhikkhunī*-order,<sup>77</sup> the majority of the contemporary Thai *saṅgha* seems to have accepted that the *bhikkhunī* lineage has been irrecoverably extinguished. At present relatively few scholars of Buddhism, academics or feminists in Thailand demand the (re-)introduction of the *bhikkhunī*-order, although their numbers are increasing. They have presented a variety of arguments which have been circulated in books and articles or brought forward in seminars, talks or even in a discussion in the Thai Senate. The arguments for the possible introduction of Thai Theravāda *bhikkhunīs* incorporate a variety of approaches and sources. These include using Western-influenced text-criticism that attempts a historical stratification of canonical texts in order to isolate the earliest text layers, which are then considered more authoritative, references to the Thai constitution and its principles of religious freedom, hermeneutics that favour the spirit over the letter, and considerations of gender inequality in contemporary Thai society. The arguments that result from these diverse approaches are – as shown above – opposed by traditionalists who refer to the authority of the Theravāda canon. Due to their opposition, traditionalists, who according to their understanding are only trying to do their “duty,” namely to preserve the integrity of the Theravāda tradition, have been accused of being prejudiced against women. In this connection, some proponents of *bhikkhunī* ordination have asked whether this is a bias already inherent in the Theravāda

<sup>76</sup> See also Seeger 2007b.

<sup>77</sup> D.III.123–125.

Buddhist canon itself that is being perpetuated.<sup>78</sup> At the same time, there are – as has been shown – influential female Buddhist practitioners who maintain that a *bhikkhunī*-order is simply not necessary since Thai society offers sufficient alternatives for women to practise the *dhamma*.

As a way out of this controversy, the “successful ... transmission of Theravāda to British society” might serve as a model. In one sense, the British Theravāda, which was “imported” from Thailand, has been very conservative in its preserving traditional forms, thus satisfying the British lay community who “wanted ‘real’ monks.”<sup>79</sup> But it has also proven to be innovative in founding an order of nuns: the women are known by the Pāli term *sīladhara* (upholder of virtue) but are most commonly referred to as nuns.<sup>80</sup> Bell writes about these *sīladharas*: “the nuns do not live by the same *Vinaya* rules as the original Theravāda nuns’ order... but by a set of rules elaborated from the Ten Precepts of the male *sāmaṇera* (novice) ordination and informed by the spirit of the *Vinaya*....”<sup>81</sup>

This act of introducing a new institution on the basis of canonical sources can be understood as an upholding of tradition and its values and, at the same time, as using its creative potential. In this way, one of the central needs of a great tradition has been fulfilled: a stable balance between conservation and accommodation to changed circumstances.

According to Phra Payutto, an amplification of the tradition is only possible if the principle of coherence is safeguarded and existent structures are not thereby abandoned. For him, the history of Buddhism has shown that if Buddhism is to survive and to be meaningful to people, for its success and longevity to be guaranteed, not only conservation of the original meaning of the Buddha’s teachings is absolutely necessary, but also cultural adaptation. Indeed, in some aspects Thai Theravāda Buddhism seems to have been very

<sup>78</sup> Channarong Bunnun 2547, pp. 89–95.

<sup>79</sup> Bell 2000, p. 17.

<sup>80</sup> Bell 2000, p. 18.

<sup>81</sup> Bell 2000, p. 18.



flexible and creative when satisfying “religious needs” or addressing modern problems. For instance, the Thai Theravāda tradition has incorporated the belief in spirits and the amulet cult. It has also provided the conceptual and practical framework for a number of social movements, such as the initiative of Phra Khru Phitak (a monk in northern Thailand) to ordain trees in order to protect them from being felled,<sup>82</sup> or the work of ‘development monks’, who interpret Buddhist teachings within the specific context of local development with the aim of building sustainable and largely self-reliant local economies.<sup>83</sup> At the same time, however, canonical scriptures have always been used to impose authority on the followers of Theravāda, and to enforce censorship of views or behaviour that were regarded as a deviation from the canonical norm.

It remains to be seen whether the establishment of para-monastic institutions or the amelioration of the situation of *maechis*, as alternatives to the *bhikkhunī*-order, will be able to satisfy the demands of those who support the introduction of a *bhikkhunī-saṅgha*. In Thailand, becoming a monk, having a son ordained as a monk or a novice, or giving donations to male members of the *saṅgha* are believed to be very efficient ways of generating religious merit (*puñña*). In comparison, *maechis* are usually poorly supported by the lay community since it is widely believed that rather little *puñña* is produced by giving them donations. Having the opportunity of being a ‘real’ *bhikkhunī* would allow Buddhist women to have similar prospects as men to generate *puñña* or to be the “field of merit” (*puññaakkhettaṃ*) for others. Furthermore, having a *bhikkhunī*-order would eventually allow women to gain social and legal status equal to *bhikkhus*.

A solution to which both the traditionalists and the proponents of introducing a *bhikkhunī*-order can subscribe is not easily found. It seems that the innovation of a new order of nuns within the tradition can only take place if it is not perceived as being in direct conflict with the Pāli canon, i.e. it can be interpreted as being in harmony

<sup>82</sup> Darlington 2007.

<sup>83</sup> Seeger and Parnwell 2007.

with the principles of the *dhammavinaya*, which means that it has to be based on consensus. Achieving such a broad consensus in Thai Theravāda Buddhism will require a great deal of effort and rethinking from all parties involved: the male *saṅgha*, the state and the Buddhist lay community.

Let me finish by citing the intellectual monk Phra Phaisan Wisalo, who says: "... once the female clerics in a new form practise precepts [*sīla*] with similar rigour as *bhikkhunīs*, they will eventually be accepted as clerics [*phra*]. [It is not relevant whether these clerics in a new form will develop out of the *maechis* or will emerge separately.] Although they do not have the name '*bhikkhunī*,' they will, nevertheless, become *bhikkhunīs* in the mind of the people [ในสำนึกของประชาชน]"<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Phra Phaisan Wisalo 2546, p. 362.

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